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**Congress Topic—AICA BERLIN 2019:** History of populism, in the cultural field

Abstract: “Populism—the Revival of Revisionism—Two Sides of the Coin”

By: Elaine A. King, AICA USA

**One Sentence Summary:** Abstract: “Populism—the Revival of Revisionism—Two Sides of the Coin”

Political Populism emphasizes contemporary global crises yet it’s not enough to react to social /cultural problems—how can we, as cultural producers, distil this information and figure out where amends should begin yet prevent tribal dynamics and sustain a tolerance for a pluralist culture?

Abstract: “Populism—the Revival of Revisionism—Two Sides of the Coin”

No definition of populism will fully describe all populists. That’s because populism is a “thin ideology” in that it “only speaks to a very small part of a political agenda,” according to Cas Mudde, the co-author of *Populism: A Very Short Introduction*. This paper suggests that to understand populism we need to reconsider 3 suppositions oft found in editorial and theoretical accounts. 1) Populism is an ideology deeply held by political players, like liberalism or conservatism; 2) Populism is inherently allied to right-wing politics; and (3) Populism appears as a new feature in the cultural field. Contrarily, I argue that populism is a broad strategy selectively employed by outsiders on both the left and right extremes to challenge the status quo. Populism in late 19th c. American politics was an essentially agrarian response—mainly rural white fears about being marginalized and a means to get power to protect self-interests. Individuals worried about the rise of black presence into mainstream politics and culture, and the influx of immigration from southern Europe. History in the 1960s and 70s re-focused from the “Great Man Theory” of interpretation to history from the ground up—this wasn’t called Populist History, but “Revisionism” that focused on race, class, and gender—Today it is *Identity Politics*. The concept of others finding representation seems central in labeling art “Populist” today—an expression of previously marginalized or “underserved” groups. I argue that the term “populism” in art is trendy more than historical: it isn’t primarily nativist (white-nationalist) as the political Populists were, instead primarily about “inclusion/exclusion.” It resembles “revisionism” of the 1980s yet more extreme and tribal. As a critic and curator in relation to this political project I query, does much of this work have its own aesthetic or conceptual merit beyond its significant social function?

### Select Biography: Elaine A. King

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Elaine A. King, Professor Emerita who taught, at Carnegie Mellon University the History of Art/Criticism/Museum Studies. Her Ph.D. is awarded from Northwestern University [1986] -Theory [School of Speech] and History of Art. Dr. King holds a joint Masters Degree in Art History/ Public Policy, Northern Illinois University [1974] and a B.S. in Art History and American History [Pre-Law Studies]. King was American University's Distinguished Art Historian in Residence for the International Program in Corciano, Italy, Fall 2006.

King is a regular contributor to Sculpture Magazine, Artes and other publications. She was the Executive Director at Carnegie Mellon Art Gallery [1985-1991] and the Executive Director and Chief Curator at Contemporary Arts Center in Cincinnati, [1993-1995]. King organized varied one-person exhibitions and catalogues; including Martin Puryear, Barry Le Va, Tishan Hsu, Gordon Matta-Clark, Elizabeth Murray, Mel Bochner, Nancy Spero, Robert Wilson, David Humphrey, Magdalena Jetelova and Martha Rosler. In September 2006, Allworth Press published an anthology *Ethics and the Visual Arts* co-edited with Gail Levin. King was guest-curator for Maria Mater O'Neill's mid-career exhibition for the Museo of Art Puerto Rico, San Juan, 2007.

She received funding from the National Endowment for the Arts, Heinz Foundation, Pittsburgh Foundation, Hillman Foundation and others. In 2001 she was awarded a Senior Research Fellowship by the Smithsonian Institution's American Art Museum to research contemporary portraiture from 1960 to present time. King was awarded a Short-term Research Fellow in 2003 from the National Portrait Gallery of the Smithsonian Institution. As a result of her research she curated the exhibition *Portrayal After Warhol*, at the Mattress Factory Museum of Contemporary Art in Pittsburgh. In the fall of 2020, King will be the guest curator at the MFMCA organizing an exhibition of artists from Puerto Rico, *After Maria*.

Elaine King is an active member of the Association of International Art Critics, and has given papers at International Congresses in England, Ireland, Wales, Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, Slovenia, Slovakia and Barbados. Recently she spoke at the College Art Association on Museums and Ethics and has given a paper at the Popular Culture International Conference in Wales on the art of Tony Oursler. King was invited to speak on the A Global Cultural Tapestry: Museums in a After Post Present, at the Third International Conference on New Directions in the Humanities at the Cambridge University, England and recently gave a paper at Laval University in conjunction with the Transcultural Exchange Conference in Quebec City. She is a freelance curator and critic who contributes regularly to Sculpture Magazine, Artes and ArtNews. This spring/summer her interviews with Keith Sonnier and Mags Harries will be published in Sculpture. King wrote a feature article "Casting Unbounded in An Expanded Age", in the acclaimed book, *Cast: Art and Objects Made Using Humanity's Most Transformational Process*, by Jen Townsend and Renée Zettle-Sterling. King has juried exhibitions around the world and recently was the Distinguished Alumna speaking at Northern Illinois University. On 2<sup>nd</sup> April 2019 at the University of Arizona, she will be giving a seminar on *Cultural Capital, Artists and the Market*.

